

*Melastoma malabathricum*

**INDIAN RHODODENDRON** is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Indomalaysia and Australasia it has purple (occasionally white) flowers with prominent yellow stamens. It is also known as *Harendong* (Javanese), *Kadalai* (Tamil), *Kaunisiga* (Fijian), *Maha-bowitiya* (Singhalese), Malabar melastome, *Mang kre* (Thai), *Moegalo* (Samoan), *Palore* (Marathi), Pink lasiandra, *Sendudok* (Malay), Singapore rhododendron, and Straits rhododendron.

*Malabathricum* means ‘of or from the Malabar coast (south-western India)’.

The bitter young leaves are used locally as salad or flavouring in stews (especially in Java) and the very small, sweet-tasting fruit pulp (which stains the mouth black) is eaten raw

Its foliage is food for a particular silkworm and it attracts several butterflies. In Singapore it provides food for a bird (of the *Dicaeum* genus) known there as the ‘flowerpecker’. In fact the fruit are attractive to many birds and they are the main distributors of the seed.

Monkeys and squirrels also enjoy them and help in the distribution.

Indian rhododendron is cultivated as an ornamental. The flowers are picked for both decoration and adornment – and in Malaysia they perform a role in exorcising rituals

In parts of south-eastern Asia the wood tar is used as a cosmetic to blacken the teeth

A black dye can be obtained from the fruit or seeds, and the leaves and roots yield a pink one.

Authorities on the native region believe that the plant’s primary value there is medicinal with its other virtues ie. its use as a source of fruit, vegetable, timber, feed, dye, fuel and ornament occupying subsidiary roles.

Indian rhododendron has been introduced elsewhere, including Hawaii where by around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries it had become naturalised. From that point it became apparent that native Hawaiian plants were beginning to be crowded out in various places. Here and in parts of North America where it has also been introduced (such as North Carolina and Florida in the United States) its invasive nature is taking hold and it is officially viewed as a noxious weed.

Its negative environmental qualities however do have advantages in certain circumstances.

Some commentators point out that its ready growth on wasteland does help to prevent soil erosion in such areas and provides cover for the regeneration of other plants.

In some parts of south-eastern Asia the plant has offered medicine for treating sick elephants.

Medicinally, local herbalists have used various parts of the plant. For instance a decoction of the leaves and shoots has been prescribed for easing diarrhoea, the powdered dried leaves have offered a remedy for dysentery (and as a wash have been applied to ulcers), and the roots have provided an ingredient for a mouthwash to counter toothache. In Malaysia particularly the powdered leaves and roots have been sprinkled on wounds and skin scabs from chicken pox or smallpox to prevent scarring.